

## Teaching adult education history in a time of uncertainty and hope

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*Adult education's continuing purpose has been questioned by writers for over twenty years and today the re-organisation and closure of some University departments brings this issue to the fore. This paper takes up the theme of really useful knowledge in a changing world from the standpoint of teaching adult education history to graduate students. Many enter their new field of practice unaware of the specific social contexts of the foundations of adult education in different places, or the genealogy of its current manifestations. Examining these different contexts, traditions, practices and practitioners can enable students to better locate themselves, connect with different traditions, understand the past and position themselves for their future. Secondly, the paper considers the idea of locating oneself in a rapidly changing political economy that has emerged from the global economic crisis and recession, the effects of which are expected to continue into the next decade.*

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A recurring and common criticism within adult education is that it has lost its way, forgotten its original purposes or mission, or become compromised by its uncritical service to business and its embrace of the market. Michael Welton wrote in 1987 that a paucity of scholarly analysis, a separation from activist involvement and adult education's respectability were at the root of 'our unease and professional restlessness'. Soon after, Jack Mezirow (1991) challenged American adult education's 'faded visions' and Michael Collins (1991) lamented the crisis associated with an obsession with technique and vocationalism. Phyllis Cunningham's 1993 call to 'get real' and her later contention that adult education was becoming more complicitous with private business and industry (1996) was echoed across the Atlantic by Jane Thompson's *Open Letter* naming how managerialism and corporatisation had permeated adult education (1993). Post-modern adult educators joined in, suggesting that there was a sense of crisis over the meaning of adult education, as there were no longer any 'overarching narratives' that make any sense (Edwards & Usher 1996).

As the new century dawned, Matthias Finger and Jose Asun (2001) argued that adult education was at 'a crossroads'. The same year a paper, reporting on conversations with long-time American adult educators, noted that reactions to the evolution of adult education from 1926 to the new century 'varied from excitement about the possibilities to frustration over the "abandonment" of earlier ideals'. The authors noted the belief that 'the true "spirit" of adult education as a means to foster democracy and the development of an enlightened society' was rapidly losing ground to the 'high tech arena of HRD training and compulsory learning' (Hensley, Maher, Passmore & James 2001). Nearly a decade later, Mike Newman's (2007) reminder of the importance of teaching choice and defiance in a time of war reflected an ongoing questioning about the purpose and future of adult education.

These writers lament a condition in stark contrast to the feisty beliefs of adult education's possibilities expressed by educators among the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Corresponding Societies, Chartists and Plebs League, of Thomas Hodgkin and others who contrasted the idea of 'really useful knowledge' to the prevailing idea of 'useful knowledge'; of the optimism of Americans such as Eduard Lindeman and Myles Horton, and later of Paulo Freire's 'pedagogy of hope' in South America, among others.

Today times have changed again and new conditions confront adult education as financial crisis, war, growing inequality and environmental concerns challenge dominant economic and ideological conventions of the past thirty years. Over a very short period in 2008, the sense of dramatic upheaval was represented by terms ranging from new times, modern times, interesting times (Kalantzis and Cope 2008), disturbing times, challenging times, troubling times (CJSAE 2009) and momentous times (IJLE 2009). By the end of the year, as stock markets threw up unprecedented collapses, the political climate, at least in the USA, shifted to one of hope. It serves to remind us that change can and does occur quickly and dramatically, that history is dynamic and that having an appreciation and theory of history is invaluable.

This paper takes up the theme of 'really useful knowledge' in a changing world from the standpoint of teaching adult education history to graduate students. History in this context takes on two meanings, firstly, the history of ideas and practices within the 'field' of adult education, and secondly, the history of the surrounding world and its impact on the practice and evolution of that field.

At a time when many of the economic certainties of the past thirty years have been exposed as fragile, and when the consequences of economic crisis impact on the work of many adult educators in their contacts with adult learners in both formal and non-formal sites, the question of what knowledge will help them locate themselves in their work as educators becomes very important.

Examining traditions and histories, different contexts, practices and practitioners becomes therefore a critical practice for adult education teachers in developing critically aware educators, so that they in turn can work with learners to be aware that education requires choices and choice requires informed learners. It can enable students to locate themselves better in their practice, connect with different traditions, understand the past and position themselves for their future. The paper considers the rapidly changing political economy that emerged as a result of the global economic crisis, and the impact of these events on the daily life of those whom many adult educators work closely with as a critical point in our history. By calling into question a number of orthodoxies and certainties of the neo-liberal worldview that have come to permeate education and adult education, the paper asks what might really useful knowledge look like today and what implications does that have for teaching and learning.

### **Adult education—a continuing purpose?**

University adult education in English-speaking countries is undergoing considerable change as departments close, are merged into larger faculties or ‘re-engineered’. In the United States seventy-four institutions had adult, continuing and community education departments but tightening budgets and shifting priorities resulted in the number of institutions offering adult education degrees decreasing by 29 percent between 1992 and 2002 (cited in Glowacki-Dudka and Helvie-Mason 2004: 8). In the United Kingdom, a study of Masters degrees in adult education revealed that twenty-six universities were offering postgraduate qualifications in various adult and continuing education fields (Field, Dockrell & Gray 2005).

Similarly, in Australia the number of universities offering adult education qualifications has contracted. Some closures and amalgamations are forced by higher education administrations at least partially inspired by the hope of reaping the benefits of

economies of scale. However, some occur with the acquiescence or agreement of adult educators who hope that the search for new fields in professional learning, communication, cultural studies, health or workplace learning can offer fresh fields and an escape from adult education's perennial problem of its marginalisation within the academy (Imel, Brockett & James 2000: 634).

Despite these contractions students continue to enrol in graduate programs where adult education and learning is a key focus, with many entering from diverse backgrounds that include health settings; public sector agencies; professional backgrounds; faith-based, non-government and social movement organisations; organisational development departments; IT; school teaching and more. They come from discipline backgrounds that range across the social sciences into business, technology and the sciences. Too often they are introduced to pedagogical concepts that are dislocated in time and place from their origins. As a result few understand the specific social contexts of the foundations of adult education in different places, or the genealogy of its current manifestations. The decline and in some cases absence of historical perspective means that theories, practices and epistemologies are at times considered with insufficient regard to their context.

Concerns about the current state of studies in the history of education (Campbell & Sherington 2002, Goodman & Grosvenor 2009) and sociology of education (Lauder, Brown & Halsey 2009), while not directly focused on adult education, are pertinent to this discussion. Goodman and Grosvenor (2009: 601) point to the importance of an historical dimension bringing 'contextual understanding to enrich contemporary research' in order to link individual and collective interests with current challenges. They characterise the current state of history of education scholarship as a 'moment of insecurity' arising from 'moments of challenge' resulting from both institutional change as well as the disappearance of history of education from

teacher education. Campbell and Sherington (2002: 46) also look at the ‘impact of neo-liberalism in economics and public policy’ as new orientations left history studies detached from its base in teacher preparation, and compounded by the reduction of staff in university education faculties. In a related discussion Lauder, Brown and Halsey (2009: 569) refer to a declining contribution of sociology of education ‘as other cognate disciplines in the social sciences such as economics take over some of the key questions that were previously the preserve’ of sociologists. Each look to the potential involved in working with other interested disciplines, arguing that these moments of insecurity can be seen as ‘moments of opportunity’ if they lead to developing new, interdisciplinary ways of working.

History however is not a dispassionate or objective study. Wilson and Melichar (1995: 422, 423), highlighting the influence of writers such as E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams, proposed ‘the “doing” of history as a counter-hegemonic strategy of re-memembering the past in order to critique the present’ and refer to Williams’ argument that, within any cultural activity including adult education, a ‘selective tradition’ emerges which reinforces a particular understanding of the past (see also Welton for a discussion on adult education’s ‘dominant tradition’, 1987: 51–55).

The doing of history involves being able to locate oneself within a tradition or community. The Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre wrote that ‘to answer the question of what I as an individual should do, one must first know of which stories I am a part, and what my roles in those stories require’. He posed the challenge this way: ‘Actors can only answer the question “what am I to do?” once they can answer the prior question of what story or stories do I find myself a part’ (MacIntyre 1985: 216).

In a similar vein Ganz (2009) writes of the need to reflect upon our own stories that help us know who we are, why we act and what we aim for. In working with a form of scaffolding to develop a wider

sense of identity, he asks students to identify firstly a story of self that explains why you were called to what you have been called. Secondly, participants are asked to write a story of us, that is what the constituency, community or organisation has been called to and what its shared purposes, goals and visions are. The third stage involves developing a story of now, what is the challenge this community now faces, the choices it must make, and the hope to which 'we' can aspire.

To know what tradition or story one is a part of requires first of all knowing what traditions there are and how they are expressed in practice. This involves enquiry and more importantly means making choices.

Adult education has its own history, and adult educators make a range of claims about it and the special role and purpose it plays. Among these are that the first adult educators were popular educators and that adult education's defining purpose is to support democracy and social change; others aim to assist adults achieve self-actualisation, or concentrate on preparing adult learners for work and see it as developing human and social capital; while others say adult education provides a second chance at education, especially in the fields of literacy and numeracy, and in underdeveloped economies. How might we understand the claims made for adult education in the early 21st century against earlier claims? Is it still a force for social or radical change, or has it been conscripted to deliver at one end of the labour process a flexible and adaptable workforce, and at the other a reflexive professional caste? Can we even say there is a clear role for adult education, or indeed that the term continues to have a particular meaning?

### **Really useful knowledge today**

The dramatic changes ushered in by the global economic crisis of late 2008 raise new questions about adult education's purpose. For teachers of adult educators, they also raise questions of how a theory

or understanding of history might help to understand these changes, what they mean and what impact they might have on politics, economics, work, everyday life and education. Here the concept of 'really useful knowledge' can assist. If 'really useful knowledge' was a term used in the 19th century to develop a critical understanding of self and society and which was of direct relevance to the struggle for social justice, what might it look like today?

The idea of really useful knowledge developed in nineteenth century England among radical working class associations. It stood in direct contrast to the idea of useful knowledge, that is, the instrumental knowledge needed to get on, versus the type of knowledge to act upon, analyse, challenge and change the existing conditions (Simon 1960, 1972; Johnson 1979, 1988; Newman 1993, 2009; Thompson 2007), or as Young (2008) describes it powerful knowledge, as opposed to the knowledge of the powerful. Education was not directed at politics for its own sake, but instead directed at 'producing political understanding that will ultimately enable transformations in the material conditions of the working classes which will free them from exploitation'. Essential to this approach was an understanding that education was the province of independent organisations independent from the state, or the church or the ruling class. It was self-instruction, connecting education to the political process and to self-management of working class institutions. For Thomas Hodgkin 'men had better be without education than be educated by their rulers' (Lloyd & Thomas 1998: 83, 103).

Aronwitz and Giroux (1985: 157) identified three points of analysis that provide a continuity between the idea of really useful knowledge today and earlier times. Firstly, it provided the basis for critique of dominant forms of knowledge; secondly, it strongly valued the development of curricula and pedagogies that begin with the problems and needs of those groups that such education was designed to serve, and thirdly, it argued for knowledge that contributed to



strategies for changing forms of domination while simultaneously pointing to more democratic forms of active community.

Today the idea of really useful knowledge has to be re-introduced, not in some backward-looking sentimental way, but in the light of the 'new forms of power' that take account of the changes in working class life and the labour process; ongoing inequalities between the populations of the north and south and within those societies; inequalities associated with race, gender and sexuality; and the growing challenges of climate change. What might really useful knowledge, as opposed to useful knowledge, look like today?

### **Global economic crisis, hope and change**

Two events dominated the world's attention in the second half of 2008, both of which will have long-term effects. The first was the rapid plunge of the world financial system, which sucked into it the surrounding economy, and the second, was the extraordinary surge of hope that accompanied the election of Barack Obama to the US Presidency. Both events challenge orthodoxies that had come to dominate conventional thinking about politics, the economy and the wider organisation and development of society.

The global economic crisis brought into sharp relief some of the orthodoxies that have underpinned social provision in education, health, housing, transport and welfare; the organisation of work, and on a broader terrain globalisation; and most importantly have been widely accepted in much adult education writing, management and research. These orthodoxies include that:

- the market is the most efficient allocator of goods and services, with an over-riding discourse that there is no alternative;
- the economic role of the state has been superseded by large corporations, which have become more powerful than nations;

- governments should vacate the economic field wherever possible and only act to provide a safety net for the most marginalised, or in certain areas of the economy such as defence and security, and in limited ways in education and health;
- government spending, and particularly government deficits, is a source of economic drain on an economy; and
- globalisation is a natural development driven by technological innovation and removed from and unrelated to human agency.

The global economic crisis turned these conventional wisdoms upside down. In response to the crisis, governments embarked on a course of economic intervention that had not been seen for decades and in a way that confirmed an understanding of the state as acting in the collective interests of capital as a whole. In addition, central banks across the major industrialised countries did everything they previously described as destructive and likely to wreck the economy by generating debt and inflation. By late 2008 much had changed in response to the global crisis and governments produced bank deposit guarantees, large-scale stimulus grants, bought bank stocks and outlined large-scale infrastructure spending. In particular, the massive bail-outs of the world's largest financial institutions by governments in the USA, Britain, Iceland, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, meant that failing banks were effectively nationalised. The vast stimulus packages introduced to stimulate demand, and the acceptance by political parties across the mainstream spectrum of the need for deficit budgets, exemplified the rapid change in the political economy. In the virtual wink of a policy-eye, huge government deficits were announced and accepted economic policy changed. In the UK Martin Wolf (2009) wrote in the *Financial Times*: 'Another ideological god has failed. The assumptions that ruled policy and politics over three decades suddenly look ... outdated'.

Even though the speed of the collapse of financial institutions, followed by manufacturing closures, was spectacular, the causes had not happened overnight, nor was the fall solely the result of bad housing (sub-prime) loans issued by greedy banks. During the last quarter of the twentieth century, a new system of capital accumulation gradually supplanted the old. Neo-liberalism involved building an intellectual agenda, an economic and political hegemony. It didn't just emerge but was won through intellectual effort, posing new solutions to hard to resolve 'problems' (by Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, among others) and delivered by its political midwives Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

When the Dow Jones Index first crossed the 10,000-point mark in the 1999 dot-com boom, it confirmed for many the claim that there was a new weightless economy and we were witnessing the 'end of history', with economic cycles considered a thing of the past. A feature of this 'new economy' was the significant redistribution of government spending away from social provision and a rapidly widening polarisation of income. The long, historic trend of the twentieth century, where inequality was reducing and improved standards of living were spreading across the populations in the advanced economies, slowed from the late 1970s and reversed more recently. US census data show that since 1973 the incomes of the top five percent of households grew at nearly four times the rate of the middle twenty percent and seven times those for the poorest twenty percent (Henwood 2005, Madrick 2009).

The effects of neo-liberal, redistributive policies and keeping wages down were already evident before the financial crash, and the starkest indicator of widening income polarisation was found in the salary and benefit packages paid to corporate executives. Remuneration for executives in Standard & Poor's 500 companies in the year before the crash averaged \$US10.5 million, or 344 times the average worker's pay, whereas three decades ago, the multiple ranged from 30–40.

Private equity and hedge fund managers from the top fifty companies did even better, averaging annual pay packets of \$US588 million each—more than 19,000 times the average worker's wage (Institute for Policy Studies 2008).

In the UK Danny Dorling (2010) studied the social and health inequalities and the consequent wealth and health disparities under both Tory and New Labour governments of the past thirty years. His conclusion is that 'people last lived lives as unequal as today, as measured by wage inequality, in 1854, when Charles Dickens was writing *Hard Times*' (cited in O'Hara 2010). He claims that, in rich countries, inequality is no longer caused by not having enough resources to share, but by unrecognised and unacknowledged beliefs which actually propagate it. He argues that five new tenets support continued injustice, that: elitism is efficient; exclusion is necessary; prejudice is natural; greed is good; and despair is inevitable. These tenets provide an ideological narrative for those who have benefitted from the income and other inequalities that have polarised advanced economies.

The trend is similar across the developed world, with the richer countries falling into three groups as measured by the Gini index<sup>1</sup> and poverty rates:

- the predominantly English-speaking (Australia, Canada, UK, U.S.), are the most unequal, have the highest poverty rates and generally have the most minimal welfare states and least regulated economies (average Gini: 0.322; average poverty rate: 13.8%);
- the continental European countries (France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands), with lower poverty rates and less income inequality (Gini: 0.283; average poverty: 9.1%); and
- the Scandinavian countries (Sweden, along with Finland and Norway), with low poverty rates, the most egalitarian income distribution (Gini: 0.272; average poverty 6.1%), generous welfare states and high-tech economies. (World Bank 2008)

Effectively challenging the dominance of neo-liberalism requires posing another problem-solving paradigm. The Bank for International Settlements (BIS), the umbrella organisation of the world's national central banks, in its 2008 annual, headlined its summary as 'the unsustainable has run its course and policy-makers face the difficult task of damage control'. The real significance of the report from the BIS is not just that it is an established, reputable institution, nor that it is pointing to the potential severity and internationalisation of the recession, but the conclusion that there are no obvious policy settings to rectify the situation (BIS 2008; Bryan 2008).

### **The impact on daily life**

The immediate impact of the crisis and recession are regularly reported in terms of the number of lost jobs; consumption and manufacturing output; house prices; and the number of large firms that close their doors. The impact of these headline measures is less often or easily identified, yet it is manifested in a 'crisis' of daily life—stress, over-work, balancing work and family life, rage and depression, and 'lifestyle' related ill-health. These hidden costs are directly connected to the work of many of the 'new' adult educators who work in the health, social work, family and aged care, charities and indigenous sectors, therefore making it vital that the history, evolution and dimensions of the crisis are understood.

The impact of the economic crisis is now spreading with obvious and less apparent consequences. Since the US recession began in late 2007, the number of people officially unemployed has doubled to 14.9 million people, or one in ten of the labour force. More than three million of those are long-term unemployed, that is, they have been out of work for at least 27 weeks (BLS 2009), while across the Euro zone, unemployment averages 9.5 percent and is accompanied by declining growth. The United Nations (2009) revised its global economic growth forecast down sharply, believing that the world economy will

contract by 2.6 per cent, which could push unemployment past the 50 million mark, while the World Bank's 2010 Global Monitoring Report concluded that the economic crisis would lead to 53 million more people remaining in extreme poverty by 2015 than otherwise would have occurred (Chan 2010).

There are other statistics that show the toll that unemployment, foreclosures and evictions, and dramatic drops in stock prices take on daily lives. Harvey Brenner, a sociologist and public health expert at Johns Hopkins University, studies the social costs of economic fluctuations. He found a direct correlation between economic downturns and an increase in suicide and suicide attempts, heart attacks, domestic violence, child abuse and murder, even estimating how many more deaths, suicides, heart attacks, homicides and admissions to mental hospitals can be expected when unemployment rises. Brenner calculated that, for every one percent increase in the unemployment rate, an additional 47,000 deaths could be expected, including 26,000 deaths from heart attacks, about 1,200 from suicide, 831 murders, and 635 deaths related to alcohol consumption. The impact is swift as shown by the dramatic increase in calls in 2008 to the US National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, which received 545,000 calls, a 36 percent rise from the 2007 levels. Similarly, rates of child abuse and domestic violence, robberies and other crimes jump during economic downturns. Brenner concluded that those affected aren't a subset of dysfunctional people but mostly normal people reacting to difficult times (Brenner 1973, 1979; current figures cited in Dreier 2009).

A question then is why do people go along with the *status quo* if this is the case? Is it because they don't believe, or have confidence, that there is any other force in society that can change the *status quo* for the better? Is it that opportunities at work to 'have a say', to be heard, to exercise democracy are almost non-existent? Is it that opportunities to discuss or pose alternative production

and investment decisions around social goods, the environment, transport, satisfying work, reducing hours to achieve improved family, community and work balance, and more importantly a different way of governance and democracy, are seen as fanciful?

## **Conclusion**

The shock of the financial crisis was quickly followed by the upsurge of optimism that accompanied the historic election of the first African-American President. Obama's election brought to an end the eight years of George Bush's neo-conservative inspired presidency and heralded a new period of hope. However, Obama's election came about not just as a reaction against the Bush era and what it represented; it could only be successful as a result of organising a movement of people, and that organising drew upon a tradition of community-based organising and education that had common roots with adult education practice. Obama had been inspired by the radical theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (Niebuhr 2008) who had also influenced the young Myles Horton (Horton 1998: 34–36) before Highlander had started, and had been trained in the community organising approach of Saul Alinsky, which continues today in the Industrial Areas Foundation where thousands of new community organisers are trained. A significant feature of Obama's campaign was the field-organiser and volunteer training systems that turned campaign volunteers into organisational leaders and which was coordinated by Marshall Ganz (Garfield and Gladstone 2008) who had previously worked with Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers (UFW) whose grassroots organising campaigns had pioneered the motto 'Si se Puede' ('Yes, it can be done') but is commonly translated into English as Obama's campaign slogan of 'Yes, We Can'. This very contemporary example is one illustration of what this paper has argued, and that is adult educators need to examine history in order to help understand connections with the past, the challenges of the present and how these enable us to create our educational practice.

The economic crisis has shed new light on the widening inequalities that deepened during the past thirty years and invite new analyses of the economy, education and the environment. What is really useful knowledge in today's context, and what do adult education students need to know? Being able to make connections with change and upheaval, to understand the scope and causes of inequality, policy prescriptions that continue to reflect neo-liberal hegemony is enhanced by making connections with the history and traditions of adult education practice and theory, as well as theory and insights from cognate disciplines in the social sciences, and involve what Bonnie Thornton Dill (2009) calls 'intersectional studies' that present 'moments of opportunity' and new interdisciplinary ways of working.

The orthodoxies that underpinned neo-liberalism's rise exercised a hegemony, which squeezed the space for critique. Now that those orthodoxies are weakened or damaged, spaces and audiences open to learn anew as alternative explanations, imaginings and different visions of the future can be considered. The crises are global, even though the impact may vary in intensity from country to country. The globalised market has broken down borders but also created new boundaries that sharply divide the world's haves and have-nots. In this context calls to think about the purpose of adult education continue afresh. Even before the global financial crisis, Mojab (2006: 347) posed the 'most urgent question' as being 'if we witness a serious turn in the history of the world, how do we envisage adult education?'

In considering what really useful knowledge is in the context of crisis; in learning about the traditions of adult education practice that connect the past with the present; in remembering the past in order to critique the present; and in linking the stories of self, community and action, it is worth recalling the words of Eduard Lindeman who in 1926 (105) wrote:



Adult education will become an agency of progress if its short-term goal of self-improvement can be made compatible with a long-term, experimental but resolute policy of changing the social order.

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*Endnotes*

The Gini index is used to summarise the course of income distribution over time, or to compare it across countries. The Gini is a number between 0 and 1; if a society were perfectly equal, its Gini index would be 0, and if it were perfectly unequal (one person had all the income), it would be 1. The Gini usually falls between .25 (the Swedish neighbourhood) and .50 (the Brazilian neighbourhood).

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